

Trumpeter Swan
18 Dec 1977
Riverton A., Fremont Co., IA
Ross Silcock, Clifford Miles
Silcock 1978

Record Number: 93-BF
Classification: NA

REFERENCES

Christmas Bird Count: IBL 48:32
Field Reports: IBL 48:47
Silcock, W.R. 1978. Possible immature Trumpeter Swan in
Fremont County. IBL 48:52-53.

VOTE: 5 NA

NA, I think Silcock has done a good job of analyzing this record, and I agree that Trumpeter is a good possibility but not proven. A closer look at the bill or another swan for size comparison would have helped. /thk

Silcock, W. R. 1978. Possible immature Trumpeter Swan in Fremont County. Iowa Bird Life 48:52-53

Possible Immature Trumpeterswan Swan in Fremont County - On December 18, 1977 Ross Silcock and Clifford Miles watched an immature swan at the Riverton Game Management Area, Fremont County, Iowa. It was an overcast day, with good to fair light, and the bird was studied from about 2:30 until 3:15 p.m. with a Balscope Sr telescope at about 300 yards.

The bird was swimming in an open area of about 20 acres within the largely frozen impoundment at the Riverton GMA where several thousand each of Snow Geese and Mallards were headquartered, although at the time of the observation the geese and most of the Mallards were absent, probably feeding. Identification as a swan was made on the basis of large size relative to the few geese present and the long neck, along with the graceful movements of the latter. The manner of carrying the head and neck upright rather than curved suggested that the bird was not a Mute Swan. The identification problem this appeared to be one of distinguishing between Whistling and Trumpeter Swans.

My feeling is that at this time of year and at this location either species is likely, the Whistling having been recorded a few times in the past (although not as late as December 18), and the Trumpeter because of the location of three breeding colonies within about 350 miles of Fremont County, Iowa. These are at LaCreek NWR in south-central South Dakota, Valentine NWR in north-central Nebraska, and Carver Lake in southeast Minnesota. The population at LaCreek is rapidly expanding to nearby lakes (see *Nebraska Bird Review* 41:15 and *American Birds* 30:969), and immatures from at least the Carver Park colony have been known to depart in fall for unknown destinations (see *Minnesota Birds: Where, When, and How Many*; 1975). However Eckert (pers. comm.) noted that birds at Carver Park are presently either wing-clipped or sedentary.

According to Bellrose (*Ducks, Geese, and Swans of North America*; 1976), the most reliable method for separating Whistling and Trumpeter Swans in the field is leg color: pinkish or flesh-colored in the immature Whistling and mustard-yellow in the immature Trumpeter. Unfortunately this could not be determined as the bird was swimming and not enough of its legs could be seen. Bill color is not determinative in immature swans, as all three species change bill color as they mature: Whistling and Trumpeter from pink or orange to black, and Mute from dark gray to orange. The timetable of these changes is variable. The Riverton bird had a dull orange bill with about the distal third black. Near the head the bill was also dark, but the extent of this dark area was difficult to determine under the conditions, as it was about the same color as the dark feathering of the crown and sides of the head. Bellrose also states that the Whistling Swan begins to lose its immature plumage in late fall and early winter, whereas the Trumpeter retains its until spring or early summer. Thus an immature Whistling Swan in December should appear basically whitish with dark shadowing. This is the impression I have of immature Whistling Swans I have seen on several occasions at CBC time at Pea Island NWR in North Carolina. In contrast, the Riverton bird was very dark, with the crown especially and the back of the neck almost chocolate-colored. In this context an interesting note was published by Gail M. Shickley in *Nebraska Bird Review* (36:46), in which an immature swan seen in flight November 21 at Cody Park in Lincoln County, Nebraska was identified as a Whistling on the basis of its plumage coloration, described as follows: "The dingy white of its plumage, washed with a slightly darker beige color on its back and upper wing surfaces, . . ." (emphasis mine). This observation coincides with my conception of early winter Whistling Swans being basically whitish, and adds weight to the possibility that the Riverton bird was a Trumpeter Swan, as the latter was very dark at a time one month later than when the Cody Park Whistling Swan appeared "dingy white".

Unfortunately, because immature plumages can be rather variable, species identification in this case cannot be made with certainty. Notwithstanding, the probability of this bird being a Trumpeter Swan cannot be eliminated based on the foregoing. -- W. ROSS SILCOCK, R.R. 2, Malvern.